

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford in Mt Benedict Cemetery
on Memorial Day
May 27, 2019
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Memorial Day in the United States began as a secular observance of what Catholics call All Souls' Day, November 2nd. In our country Memorial Day was originally a remembrance of all those who gave their lives in the service of our country during the War Between the States. It was called *Decoration Day* because the graves of our battlefield dead were marked with flags and flowers. In recent decades the memorial has expanded to *all* deceased veterans, and then to all our beloved day whether military or civilian. And the decorating of graves continues the custom in old world Catholic countries of visiting cemeteries and gravesites of family members on All Souls' Day. And this is a reminder that there is also an annual Chinese springtime observance of honoring ancestors with flowers, snapshots at gravesites, picnics and sometimes even flying kites and setting off firecrackers!

I mentioned the American Civil War, or as Southerners call it, "The War of Yankee Aggression." During that war a terrific battle was fought at Franklin, Tennessee, which was farm country south of Nashville and today is a tony suburb of that city. Many soldiers on both sides died in that battle and were buried in the fields of a plantation. The plantation house had been turned into a hospital. When the owners returned after the war they carefully turned the field into a cemetery, tending the graves, placing markers, and planting flowering shrubs. Many Northern families travelled South to recover the bodies of their fallen relatives. But when they came to Franklin and saw the care being given to their departed loved ones, they did not exhume the remains of these soldiers. They were content to leave them in the battlefield become hallowed ground. You can visit that cemetery in Franklin and hear the story of how, in a remarkable way, honoring the dead brought former enemies together in a shared value.

A remembrance, especially formally enacted, such as visiting the cemetery, or assisting at Mass, is a precious connection between our natural life here on earth, and the supernatural realm beyond reach of our bodily senses. And we remember our beloved departed not only as a continuing part of our obedience to that part of Divine Law which says "Honor thy father and thy mother." But also in the hope and conviction that in God's good time we will meet them again in the heavenly realm. At the same time we honor the memory of all those unknown to us, whose

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lives were given in battle to protect and defend the great freedoms we enjoy as a nation. Our citizens must never forget that it is the soldier, sailor, and airman, who has won and preserved our freedoms.

Some of you here today may adhere to a protestant expression of Christian faith. The tenets of your belief historically found it difficult to actually pray for the dead. My friend Fr Peter Stravinskis tells of an ecumenical gathering where he met up with a prominent theologian who told him: "Father, our reformed theology does not admit to any doctrine of prayer for the dead. But I can assure you every person I know prays for his departed loved ones." And so the reservation against praying for the dead has been softening in recent times, and observances such as Memorial Day have helped do that, as have practices such as bringing flowers to church for Sunday services near anniversaries of departed family members and friends.

If you are Catholic, you come from a tradition going right back to the Last Supper which made the Mass the pre-eminent place of meeting Jesus. And because He is Lord of both the living and the dead, and all live unto Him, at the Mass we are in the presence of all who have been joined to Jesus through baptism and their obedience to Him. We ask for their prayers, and we pray for them, and join with them and the whole company of Heaven, in the praise of Almighty God.

Most of our American churches, protestant and Catholic, do not have cemetery churchyards around them, (although the older ones on the east coast and the western Spanish missions do.) And so it is a helpful and visible reminder of our faith that we offer our worship especially on Memorial Day, in this cemetery. This national holiday is much more than about going to a parade and lighting up the barbecue, as enjoyable as those things are. As we honor the dead, our beloved dead and those who died in service of our country, we are fulfilling the great commandment of love. And we renew and refresh our own belief that Almighty God, on the last day, will raise up our own mortal bodies from the earth. And so Memorial Day is part of what we say every time we recite the Nicene Creed and affirm our belief in "the communion of saints." May the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace and may light perpetual shine upon them. Amen.